DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 069 CG 022 564

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TITLE The Inviting Process: A Perceptual Approach to Professional Helping.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Theories; *Counseling; *Counselor Client Relationship; *Educational Philosophy; *Helping Relationship; Interpersonal Relationship; Interprofessional Relationship; *Models; Perception; Self Concept; Self Esteem
IDENTIFIERS *Invitational Learning Model (Purkey)

ABSTRACT

The Invitational Learning model, developed by William Purkey and others, is a philosophical framework for counseling and development based on perceptual theory that emphasizes the importance of an "inviting" stance in human interaction. This paper focuses on the inviting process and its application to professional helping relationships. The first section provides an overview of the four levels of professional functioning: intentionally and unintentionally disinviting, and unintentionally and intentionally inviting. It also identifies five factors in the Invitational Learning framework that contribute to, or detract from helpful relationships: people, places, policies, programs, and processes. The second section describes in detail the three stages of the inviting process. The Preparation stage entails having the desire to help, expecting good things, preparing the setting, and reading the situation. The Initiating/Responding stage requires counselors to choose their behaviors and messages caringly, acting appropriately and respectfully, honoring the "net" (by which clients preserve their personal space), and ensuring that the inviting messages are understood and received. The Follow-Up stage consists of interpreting responses, negotiating, evaluating outcomes, and developing trust. The final section briefly discusses the compatibility of the inviting process with other approaches to professional helping. References are included. (TE)

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The Inviting Process: A Perceptual Approach to Professional Helping

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The Inviting Process: A Perceptual Approach to Professional Helping

> There is, of course, a wide variation of what these thousands of counselors do.
>
> C. Gilbert Wrenn, *The World of the Contemporary Counselor*, 1973, p. 251.

Counselors, social workers, nurses, and other helping professionals offer a range of services in a variety of settings, including mental health centers, schools, prisons, hospitals, and residential programs. Common to all of these professions and settings is the continuing quest for viable theories and effective practices, which can be integrated into human service programs to meet the needs of divergent populations. These many professions have developed what appears to be a limitless number of theories and approaches to helping relationships.

With such a proliferation of approaches, it is sometimes difficult for practitioners to decide which is best for any given situation or identified problem. This uncertainty is particularly true when clients have broad concerns and complex behaviors with which to contend. For this reason, many helping professionals search for a framework, a structure, by which they can integrate compatible approaches into a comprehensive program of services.

An expanded approach that emphasizes an integrated view of helping relationships is the *Invitational Learning* model developed by William Purkey and others (Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987, 1990). *Invitational*

Learning embraces a wide-angle vision of the services needed to meet the diverse challenges of today's helping relationships. At the same time, this model encourages helpers and helpees to move beyond the notion of remediating immediate concerns towards the exploration of relatively boundless potential for future development.

Invitational Learning has been described in earlier writings and presented as an effective approach for counseling and development (Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987, 1990). Specifically, the levels of professional functioning, the essential elements of an inviting stance, and factors that influence human interactions and development have been explored in these writings. The purpose of this article is to focus on the inviting process and its application in professional helping relationships. By way of introduction, an overview of the levels of functioning, the essential elements of professional relationships, and influential factors in human development are presented.

An Overview of Invitational Learning

William Purkey developed the *Invitational Learning* model by first describing four levels of human functioning that cross a spectrum of helpful and harmful behaviors, and include a range of intentional and unintentional purposes. By combining the concept of *invitations* and *disinvitations* with the constructs *intentionality* and *unintentionality*, he created these four levels of functioning:

I. Intentionally Disinviting. When people behave in purposefully harmful and destructive ways towards themselves and others, they function at a least desirable level. Messages that tell people they are irresponsible, inca-

pable, and worthless are indicative of this lowest level of functioning. At this level, people intend to demean, degrade, and destroy the value and worth of themselves and others. Counselors who are intentionally disinviting are destructive and lethal forces in the lives of people who seek their assistance.

II. Unintentionally Disinviting. Sometimes harmful results occur even when they are not intended. People who behave in careless and thoughtless ways, are perceived as being *disinviting* toward others despite their "best intentions." Their behaviors are ill-timed, poorly planned, misguided or extravagant. When messages are misinterpreted, gestures are offensive, and actions are unclear, negative outcomes occur. While the harm is *unintended*, damage occurs nonetheless. Counselors who are inconsistent, overzealous, disorganized, forgetful, and unreliable behave at an unintentionally harmful level.

III. Unintentionally Inviting. Occasionally when positive results are noted, helpers are uncertain what they did to achieve them. Some counselors enter professional relationships without establishing purpose and direction, or they lack an adequate command of essential helping skills. Because they have "good intentions," however, most of their relationships are beneficial. One danger of functioning at this level is that a lack of knowing *what* one is doing to achieve positive results makes it unlikely that consistent helpful relationships will be established. This lack of consistency prevents counselors from repeating successful relationships. Counselors who function at a high level of intentional practice are able to repeat their successes over and over for the benefit of many clients.

IV. Intentionally Inviting. To be consistent, counselors and other helpers reach for a high level of professional functioning; they demonstrate

an effective command of helping skills, a broad knowledge base, and unconditional acceptance and regard for themselves and others. Counselors and other helpers who function at a high level of professional practice consistently create messages and invitations, enabling people to feel valued and worthwhile. At the same time, these beneficial messages encourage optimal human development by becoming the building blocks upon which to construct a healthy, well-functioning self-concept. *Invitational Learning* is founded on the belief that one's perception and self-concept are the combined forces that guide development and existence.

In addition to the four levels of functioning, *Invitational Learning* identifies five factors that contribute to, or detract from, the development of helpful relationships. These five factors are: people, places, policies, programs, and processes. By way of summary, these conditions, individually and in combination, function at one or more of the levels described above. It is easy to see how people behave at different levels of functioning, but it is less obvious how the other factors influence human development. Policies, such as a sign saying, "No Visitors Allowed," and places, such as dimly lit hallways in elementary schools, dissuade people in subtle, yet powerful ways. Similarly, programs that neglect cultural differences, or processes used for the convenience of an elite few, are perceived as disinvitations by people who seek assistance and services. An effective application of the invitational approach considers each of these factors, known as the "Five P's," and follows the axiom, "everything counts" in human development and learning.

Invitational Learning embraces the belief that there are essential elements and characteristics inherent in every beneficial relationship. For this

reason, invitational counseling is composed of a professional stance consisting of optimism, trust, respect, and intentionality. Each of these characteristics also are embedded in the inviting process, which outlines the stages of *Invitational Learning*. For the remainder of this article, we will explore these stages of inviting and their application in professional helping relationships.

The Inviting Process

> I now believe there is no biological, geographical, social, economic, or psychological determiner of man's condition that he cannot transcend if he is suitably invited or challenged to do so.
>
> Sidney Jourard, *Disclosing Man to Himself*, 1968, p. 59.

Several approaches to counseling and professional helping propose multiple-step models of progressive stages, which include introduction, facilitation, exploration, action, follow-up, and closure (Brammer, 1985; Egan, 1982; Corey, 1982; Patterson & Eisenberg, 1983). The inviting process is similar to these models in that it proposes a three-step structure including a preparation stage, an initiating/responding stage, and a follow-up stage. Each stage consists of four steps to ensure that all behaviors and messages are aimed at the highest level of professional functioning. By following the steps within each stage of the process, counselors aim at a high level of intentionality—purpose and direction—and choose only the most beneficial actions—invitations—in their helping relationships.

The Preparation Stage

The first stage of the inviting process consists of four steps to increase the probability that a relationship will be successful. Each of the four steps enhances the potential and capability of a counselor to prepare for successful relationships and attain a high level of professional functioning. The first step in this preparation process is to have the desire to help.

Having the Desire

It may seem obvious that effective counselors must have a desire to help, but in practice many professionals fail to succeed because they lack the essential ingredient of *wanting to* be a beneficial presence in the lives of others. Counselors who have difficulty relating to people of different cultures, who avoid clients from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who are uncomfortable with disabled persons, or who shun those seeking their services are unsuccessful in their helping relationships. In contrast, professionals who look beyond the difficulties and differences among people see the unlimited potential for human capability, responsibility and value, which often go unnoticed. These helpers are capable of establishing genuine, caring rapport, an essential ingredient of the helping process.

Sometimes counselors lack the desire to help because their counselees are disinterested themselves. Successful counselors are not fooled by this facade. They recognize it as a mechanism for shirking responsibilities and avoiding risks that people must face if constructive change is possible. The inviting process encourages counselors and other helpers to develop a strong desire to assist a wide audience of people who are seeking services. At the same time, it discourages counselors from diminishing their willingness and desire

in the face of apathy and disinterest on the part of those who need their help. At these times of resistance, counselor desire must be at peak levels.

Having desire is an essential prerequisite to effective helping, but it is not a sufficient ingredient. Successful counselors know that willingness and desire must be matched by complementary skills and adequate support for the client. Invitational counseling stresses the importance of knowing one's professional limits and recognizing the boundaries of a helping relationship. When counselors reach the boundary of their professional competence, they openly convey this to those who seek assistance, and take the necessary steps to refer these cases to appropriate professionals and agencies in the community. Counselors with the appropriate desire and adequate skill are able to move to the next step of expecting positive outcomes from their helping relationships.

Expecting Good Things

The second step in the preparation stage is to believe that positive results are possible. Without this belief, the client's intention and desire to seek assistance are challenged from the start. Little progress is made in a relationship that lacks hope and encouragement. For this reason, optimism is another essential ingredient in all helping relationships. Counselors who have faith in their clients' willingness and ability to confront issues and make decisions are able to establish positive relationships. By the same token, clients who believe in the abilities of their counselors are likely to take chances and make difficult decisions.

In contrast, counselors who are frustrated, overwhelmed, and underskilled lack the self-confidence necessary to be effective helpers. They form

relationships, but soon discover that little progress is being made. Frequently, these counselors blame their clients for the unsatisfactory outcomes of their ill-fated relationships: "He was not interested in helping himself." "She has so much talent, but refuses to use it." "I cannot help him if he does not show up for the sessions." "I have done everything I can do."

Counselors who hold optimistic expectations refuse to limit their options and alternatives in the helping process. They function, as Ivey (1983) indicated, at a high level of *intentionality*, dependably searching for alternatives and refusing to be locked into one mode of responding. Invitational counselors accept this challenge of behaving intentionally and, at the same time, maintain faith in themselves, their clients, and the efficacy of the helping relationship. This faith is tempered by an accurate assessment of their skills and a belief that effective change in the human condition seldom occurs as the result of a single act. These counselors are aware that in human development and human behavior, as noted earlier, *everything counts*. Every strategy chosen, every behavior displayed, every issue decided makes a positive or negative difference to someone in a relationship. Nothing is neutral, and for this reason, adequate preparation is required to achieve the most beneficial results.

Preparing the Setting

While having the desire and expecting good things are essential ingredients, they cannot stand alone without adequate skill and preparation. Such preparation does not happen incidentally or by accident; it takes planning and requires accurate perceptions about the person seeking assistance. It also demands a working knowledge about the issues at hand. Frequently, the time and

effort needed to gather this information and knowledge is considerable. But, to neglect it jeopardizes the ultimate success of the helping relationship.

Preparing the setting in counseling is analogous to inviting one's friends for dinner. When you invite people to dinner, you plan a menu, set the table, and choose activities that are pleasing to your guests and result in a successful evening. In planning this dinner party, several decisions are made. Will it be casual or formal? Should we use fine crystal and china, or everyday dishes and flatware? What about entertainment? Esoteric conversation or party games? As you ask each question and make these decisions, you consider the objectives of the dinner party as well as the tastes and preferences of your guests. An accurate assessment of these factors leads to the next step, called reading the situation. In much the same way that caring, sensitive people plan dinner parties, counselors who read situations accurately develop keen sensitivity, awareness and empathy towards the people they serve.

Reading the Situation

Reading situations is the ability to understand and predict the needs of others, their perception of situations, and their corresponding behaviors. This ability to enter another person's perceptual world and understand it clearly is a hallmark of effective helping. Counselors who nurture this ability are able to bridge the differences between their perceptions and those of their counselees. In invitational language, they understand the role and responsibilities they have as a *sender* to care about the perceptions and feelings of the *receiver*.

Returning to our example of the dinner party, if you invite me for dinner but fail to tell me the affair is semi-formal and I show up in blue jeans, we

both will be embarrassed. By the same token, if you plan a delicious menu of roast beef and are unaware of your company's distaste for red meat, the meal will be less than successful. Your dinner guests will make a hungry departure.

In establishing successful counseling relationships we consider all the factors that contribute to favorable outcomes. By adequately preparing for success, we are in position to choose appropriate strategies and interventions. Having the desire, expecting good results, preparing the setting, and reading situations accurately help us move toward the next stage of the inviting process--initiating and responding.

Initiating/Responding Stage

The decisions counselors make during the preparation stage allow them to create beneficial messages and accurate responses in their helping relationships. Having the desire to help and planning good intentions do not in and of themselves assure successful results. Effective relationships must move beyond preparation and toward action. This progression is demonstrated by counselors who choose behaviors carefully, act appropriately at all times, respect the person in the process, and follow up the helpful messages they send.

Choosing Caringly

Counselors who take the time to assess situations and read counselees accurately are in a favorable position to choose helping behaviors caringly. When counselors enter relationships without a clear understanding of the situation or an adequate knowledge of the persons involved, they risk choosing behaviors carelessly and thoughtlessly. Relationships founded on such choices are unlikely to produce desirable outcomes and may create harmful results.

Invitational Learning proposes several criteria with which to evaluate messages and behaviors in helping relationships. Counselors who use these criteria increase the likelihood of being successful in their professional practice by sending the most beneficial messages; what we call *invitations*. The criteria for selecting invitations are: (1) each behavior and message chosen by a counselor protects the safety and welfare of the counselee, (2) several opportunities for examining and accepting messages are presented during the course of a helping relationship, (3) the counselee has experienced success in the past when accepting these types of messages, (4) the messages and behaviors selected by the counselor are socially appropriate, (5) all behaviors and messages are clear and understandable, (6) the counselee believes that he or she can accept the message and meet the expectations inherent therein, and (7) the expectations are not too demanding in intensity or duration.

In effective relationships, counselors choose initial behaviors and messages to establish rapport and gather information from the counselee. If successful at this initial stage, counselors will discover that counselees are receptive to more demanding and complex messages as further trust is developed.

Acting Appropriately

Skilled counselors act upon the choices they make in their helping relationships. They have intentions, which they choose caringly, and they behave responsibly and appropriately to see that these intentions become reality. Having a well-intended plan does not lead to a successful relationship until specific actions are taken by the counselor. This is analogous to the often heard plea: "You have to come and see us sometime." The intent of this message becomes reality only when one of the parties takes action and extends a clear,

understandable invitation: "Would you be able to come to our house for dinner this Friday evening?" Counselors, who act appropriately, create and send beneficial messages to realize their carefully chosen intentions.

An added dimension of acting appropriately is the genuine respect counselors show toward all persons in the relationship. Demonstrating this level of respect means being clear about your intentions, choosing reasonable expectations, treating people equitably, and honoring their privacy. Counselors who achieve this level of respect value the personal space of individuals and honor the "net" that exists between helpers and helpees.

Honoring the Net

All helping relationships require space between helpers and helpees. *Invitational Learning* symbolizes this space as a "net" that marks an inviolable boundary across which neither the counselor nor counselee should enter. To illustrate, let us consider self-disclosure as a skill that enhances helping relationships. Self-disclosure, the revealing of personal information about oneself, facilitates helping processes when used appropriately to bring people closer together. However, when self-disclosures are demanded or when inquiries are extremely personal and ill-timed by counselors, they violate the space of people seeking assistance. Similarly, counselor self-disclosure that is self-serving inhibits the development of trustful relationships.

By honoring the net, counselors accept responsibility for creating and sending beneficial messages, and at the same time, they respect the client's right to accept or decline the invitations received. Some counselors have the best intentions but fail in their relationships because they violate this rule of honoring the net. They want to help so much that they forget about the auton-

omy of the individual. No matter how helpful a counselor wants to be, the helping relationship will not be successful unless the autonomy and uniqueness of the helpee are honored and respected.

Sometimes it is not clear how a particular message is perceived, and we may ask, "Am I violating the net by sending this invitation?" In most cases, when counselors take care to assure the welfare and best interest of their clients and create beneficial messages, they should send the invitation. By doing so, counselors allow their counselees to make the decision about whether or not the invitation is acceptable. Consideration and evaluation of an invitation can occur only when counselors send their messages and ensure their reception.

Ensuring Reception

Some invitations are sent but never received. They get lost, misplaced, and misunderstood by those for whom they are intended. Similarly, communications and other messages are misfiled, unheard, unnoticed, and unanswered on occasion. Invitations and messages that are "lost in the mail" or otherwise "unopened" cannot be acted upon. For this reason, counselors who embrace the principles of *Invitational Learning* accept responsibility, inherent in the inviting process, for ensuring that their messages are received and understood as they intend them.

In counseling, ensuring reception means confirming that counselees understand the goals of the relationship, accept their role and responsibility in the helping process, and agree to act on the choices they make. Sometimes, counselors and other helping professionals evaluate a situation, determine a plan of action, and present strategies without winning the cooperation of

their clients. On these occasions, it is unlikely that the suggestions and strategies offered will be received and accepted. When this happens, misunderstandings and hurt feelings occur. In contrast, when counselors stay tuned to the needs of their clients and seek cooperation throughout the helping relationship, they are likely to observe beneficial outcomes. These positive results are interpreted and evaluated in the follow-up stage of the inviting process.

Follow-up Stage

Sending beneficial messages, as we have seen, is contingent on adequate knowledge of the situation and creation of appropriate responses. Successful helping relationships continue beyond these two stages to include an evaluation of outcomes. Invitational counseling calls this the follow-up stage, which includes an interpretation of responses, a negotiation of positions, an evaluation of relationships, and the development of trust.

Interpreting Responses

Communication between counselors and counselees is always open to countless interpretations. In invitational counseling, the messages sent by a counselor are received and interpreted by the counselee. By the same token, the responses of the counselee are interpreted by the counselor. Through accurate interpretations by both the counselor and counselee the relationship proceeds in a positive, helpful direction. Because the counselor leads the relationship, it is critical that he or she interprets the counselee's responses accurately.

Many pieces of information are required to assess responses accurately. Has the counselee received the intended message? Is the message understood? Does the counselee accept the message? If so, does he or she understand the re-

sponsibilities inherent in the acceptance? Has the counselee rejected the message? If so, is the entire message rejected or only part of it? Which part? The information needed to answer these questions is acquired as part of the ongoing relationship and demands effective communication skills.

Counselors who apply the principles of *Invitational Learning* call on all the basic skills required in effective helping relationships. They employ listening, attending, clarifying, questioning, and other skills to correctly interpret the responses of those who seek their assistance. When counselors discover that clients do not accept the invitations sent in the helping relationships, they move toward a process of negotiation.

Negotiating

Sometimes differences of opinion and perception become barriers to successful relationships. Counselors who accurately interpret their clients' nonacceptance of helpful messages skillfully negotiate and compromise so these temporary obstacles do not permanently hinder the progress of the relationship. No obstacle is insurmountable when the helping process is at stake.

To be successful negotiators, counselors remain flexible in the behaviors and alternatives they choose. Holding steadfastly to a plan of action regardless of its rejection by a client is hardly the way to establish a compromising posture. If an action or plan is not accepted by the counselee, the invitational counselor searches for an appropriate alternative that is acceptable. Often, the acceptance and completion of an alternative plan of action leads to a return, review and subsequent acceptance of the original message.

Invitational counselors understand that some messages are going to be rejected. They have the skills to address this probability and accept responsibility for handling rejection in appropriate ways without allowing the helping relationship to deteriorate. When counselors persist in their helping relationships, and search for acceptable alternatives, they demonstrate a high level of desire and willingness to be a beneficial force in the lives of others. Such a stance gives them a sound foundation upon which to adequately and accurately measure their success.

Evaluating Outcomes

In every human endeavor, we evaluate the outcomes. Friends assess our companionship, dinner guests comment on menus, athletes celebrate winning scores, voters select candidates, teachers grade students, judges rule on evidence, audiences applaud performances, and counselors evaluate progress with their clients. All events in life, regardless of their significance, are given a negative or positive value in some way or other. This assessment helps us to decide how beneficial particular events are in our lives.

The inviting process includes an evaluation of outcomes and in this way, demonstrates the importance of counselor accountability. Counselors use many methods of gathering data to evaluate their helping relationships. These methods include administering standardized tests and inventories, using biofeedback, taking physical measurements, and completing behavior rating scales among others. In addition, counselors check with significant people in their clients' lives, such as parents, spouses, peers, employers, teachers, and friends, to assess the progress being made. These same methods are applied by counselors who follow the tenets of *Invitational Learning*.

Sometimes counselors say they are *too busy* providing important services to take the time to evaluate what the are *doing* or *how well* they are doing it. Invitational counselors understand that they are responsible not only for *what* they do, but also for demonstrating that what they do makes a positive difference in the lives of people who seek their assistance.

Evaluation of services and relationships is essential in the inviting process, but it is not the final step. *Invitational Learning* promotes the belief that counseling includes developmental, preventive, and remedial relationships, and therefore embraces a philosophy that all helping relationships should lead to future alliances, enabling individuals to develop their fullest potential. In practice, the resolution of a concern should lead to further relationships that enhance future development. To establish this sequence of relationships, counselors attain a high level of trust in all their professional practices.

Developing Trust

The inviting relationship consists of a series of messages, invitations if you will, extended by the counselor to the counselee and back again. The progress made in this relationship depends on the frequency of invitations accepted and acted upon successfully. In this way, the inviting process is cyclical; one successful invitation leads to another, and so forth. As counselees experience successful relationships, they establish faith in themselves and their counselors. As this trust emerges, counselees are willing to take risks and continue the journey of self-exploration and self-actualization with their counselors. According to the invitational model, after each success counselees return to the beginning of the process, find the desire and willingness to

explore a new venture, and again work through the stages of *Invitational Learning*.

In successful relationships, counselees willingly move on to new issues, future concerns, and other topics related to their development. They trust themselves to discover new ways of living and being. Eventually, they reach out to others in caring ways that place them in the role of a helper, and the inviting cycle continues.

The Compatibility of the Inviting Process

Purkey and Schmidt (1987) presented the inviting relationship as a compatible model for other approaches to professional helping. They defined the elements of compatibility as: (1) an acceptance of a perceptual orientation to understanding human behavior; (2) an emphasis on self-concept as a dynamic force in human development; (3) an unwavering respect for human respect and dignity; and (4) the encouragement of wide applicability. Counseling approaches and other professional relationships that accept these elements are compatible with the inviting process.

Approaches such as person-centered counseling, Adlerian counseling, reality therapy, and cognitive behavior modification embrace many if not all that beliefs of *Invitational Learning*. They value the role of perception and self-concept in human development and they hold a high regard for human welfare. In addition, these approaches, and others like them, encourage wide application of varied services offered by professional counselors in an array of clinical and educational settings. These services include individual and group processes, consultation, assessment, and instruction. This variety of

services allows counselors to focus on developmental, preventive, and remedial concerns as needed.

The inviting process encourages application across a wide spectrum of professional functions. The process is presented here, not as a new method of counseling, but rather, as a belief system and guide for professional practice that can be integrated with compatible theories and approaches to helping. Learning the process and applying its twelve steps enhances a counselor's professional stance, regardless of the approaches adopted or the theories followed when establishing authentic, caring relationships.

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